

THE HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE UNITARIAN CHURCH BUILDING

at

CHARLES AND FRANKLIN STREETS BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

A THESIS PREPARED

by

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SUMMARY

The story of the history and construction of the First Unitarian Church Building, at Charles and Franklin Streets, Baltimore, Maryland, will be presented by the writer in as clear and interesting a manner as his ability will permit.

The church at Baltimore is the birthplace of Unitarianism. It was built by a group of religious liberals who were originally from New England. The Rev. William Ellery Channing delivered the ordination sermon for the first minister, Rev. Jared Sparks. Both Channing and Sparks have since become famous.

The church is one of beauty and sturdiness, and has helped make its architect, Maximilian Godefroy, celebrated. It is considered one of the best examples of Graeco-Roman architecture in the United States. The outside of the church has remained the same, but the interior was remodeled in 1893. The writer has tried to give a clear description of these alterations and the method of supporting the ceiling.

There are at present many artistic and historical furnishings in the auditorium of the church. They include a chancel window, mosaic panel of the Last Supper, the original pulpit from which Rev. Channing preached, a bust of Rev. Channing, and a bust of Jared Sparks.

THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

The Rev. Dr. James Freeman of King's Chapel, Boston, Mass., was the "Patriarch of Unitarianism in America." This religion, like so many other liberal movements of its time originated in New England.

Unitarianism denies the divinity of Christ, and also the divinity of the Holy Ghost. It is opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity, and denies that there are three persons in the Godhead. It regards Jesus as highly exalted, but nevertheless a created and subordinate being. These principles, which were contrary to the beliefs at that time met much opposition in New England, and the advocates of Unitarianism had considerable difficulty in organizing congregations.

The first real step in the formation of the Unitarian Church took place in Baltimore, Maryland, in the fall of 1816. At this time Rev. James Freeman started a series of services in Gibney's Hall on South Charles Street. These services were attended by a large gathering of Baltimore citizens, and interest was so great that Rev. Freeman decided to organize a Unitarian Church, "modeled upon the simple principles of the Gospels."

On February 10, 1817 a meeting was called for the purpose of organizing a religious society, and taking into consideration the best means of erecting a building for the accommodation of Christians who were Unitarians, and who cherished liberal sentiments on the subject of religion. This meeting was held at the home of Henry Payson, 21 Hanover Street. The list of the first board of directors shows the following names: Henry Payson, James W. McCulloh, Cumberland D. Williams, Ezekiel Freeman, and Charles H. Appleton. The object of the meeting having been stated and discussed, it

was unanimously resolved, that it was expedient and desirable to form a society for the purposes aforesaid; and a plan or constitution of government being proposed, as provided by an Act of the General Assembly of Maryland, entitled, "an Act to incorporate certain persons in every Christian Church or congregation in this State," the same was debated and adopted. From this assembly of gentlemen, most of them originally from New England, the First Independent or Unitarian Church of Baltimore had its inception.

A lot on the Northwest corner of Charles and Franklin streets was purchased shortly afterward, but only after much discussion concerning the selection of a site. Many of the members thought that the Charles and Franklin location was "too far out from the city," and it is said the location was determined by a majority of one.

The architect employed to design and build the church was Maximilian Godefroy, a French emigre, and one of the most distinguished architects of his day.

The following letter, written on the 19th. of April, 1817, by Edward Hinkley to Jared Sparks (First minister of the church), is a graphic and naive account of the progress of the new society, and contains the very

At the present time the First Unitarian Church is very close to the geographical center of Baltimore City, but at the time the church was constructed the streets were rough dirt roadways, and the surrounding property heavily wooded.

first intimation of a "call" that Sparks ever received from Baltimore.

"Most cheerfully do I hasten to answer the inquiries contained in your letter of the 13th. I have been informed by Nathaniel Williams, Esq., who is greatly interested in establishing the new Unitarian Church in this city, that the whole cost of the building is estimated at \$40,000, and twenty-seven persons have subscribed \$17,000, and that the remainder will be raised from the sale of pews. The meeting-house will be situated in the most elevated and pleasant part of the city. It will be large and commodious, and, as the architect, Mr. Godefroy is celebrated for his skill and taste it will doubtless be a beautiful specimen of architecture, the most beautiful, it is said, of any in Baltimore."

On June 5, 1817, the corner stone of the new church was laid. A plate was placed in the center with this inscription in Greek: "To the King Eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God." The building was completed and dedicated October 29, 1818; the Rev. Dr. James Freeman preaching the dedicatory sermon. Thus the "First Independent Christ's Church" was established in Baltimore. In this new house of worship, on the fifth day of May, 1819, the Rev. William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon ordaining the first minister Rev. Jared Sparks. This sermon delivered by Channing, who was then the leader of religious liberals, is now known as the "Baltimore Sermon." This discourse, outlining the doctrines of the Unitarian Church, and clearly defining the position of liberalism

② The total cost, as given by Charles Vare in "A View of Baltimore," was \$100,000. This seems to be a more reasonable estimate.

at that time, marks the beginning of Unitarianism as an organization in America. A great movement began, and more than one hundred congregational parishes in New England at once accepted the Unitarian position as defined in the "Baltimore Sermon." Channing's sermon had a circulation unsurpassed by any pamphlet in America, until Webster's "Reply to Hayne." It was translated into various languages and published all over the world. Dr. Channing was elected to the new "American Hall of Fame" in 1900, as one of the three elected in the "Preachers and Theologians Class."

The experience of the Unitarian movement in this country has been especially true of the First Independent Christ's Church of Baltimore. The first minister, the Rev. Jared Sparks, was obliged to defend his position against attacks from other pulpits, which he did ably, in his discourses and in "The Unitarian Miscellany," but illhealth compelled him to resign his pastorate in July, 1823. Afterwards he became known as the first professor of history at Harvard, George Washington's Historian, author of "The Life and Letters of Franklin," editor of "The North American Review," and of "Sparks' American Biography," and President of Harvard University.

For the succeeding five years the church had no regular pastor. Rev. Dr. Greenwood of Boston was a supply for two years; he was assisted a few months by the Rev. William H. Furness.

The Rev. George W. Burnap, a graduate of Harvard, was ordained as the second pastor of this church April 23, 1828 and was a faithful pastor during nearly thirty-two years. He became widely known as an author in literature and theology. At Dr. Burnap's death, September 8, 1859, eleven

volumes of Controversial Theology attested his ability as a writer and his zeal in the unitarian cause. Thus the period covered by the first two pastorates of this church was an era of justification.

After a ministry of three years the Rev. Nathan A. Chamberlain, the third pastor, resigned in 1863 to enter the ranks of the Episcopal Church.

The fourth pastor, the Rev. John F. W. Ware, was an orator of power; his pastorate of the church itself was only of three years duration; but he continued to preach to large audiences in Baltimore for three years, 1867-1870, at the Masonic Temple, at Ford's Opera House and other places. He accepted a call to the Arlington-Street Church, Boston. A published volume of his sermons "Wrestling and Waiting" attest how strong, beautiful and invigorating were his discourses. During this period the church was extremely active in entertaining the soldiers of the Civil War.

In addition to John F. W. Ware's preaching in Baltimore, the Rev. Dr. Lothrop, Rev. Dr. George Ellis, Rev. Dr. Henry W. Bellows, Rev. Dr. William H. Furness, Rev. Dr. Andrew Preston Peabody, Rev. Dr. Orville Dewey, Rev. Dr. Frederick Augustus Farley, preached in the church. It was a time of persuasion.

After the fifth and short pastorate of the Rev. Edward C. Guild, who resigned in 1872, the church, in October of the same year, called the Rev. Charles Richmond Weld. He was graduated from Harvard in 1872, ordained January 2, 1873, the Rev. Frederick A. Farley, D.D. of Brooklyn, N.Y., presiding at the ^{ordaining} ~~ordinary~~ council. This pastorate marks the age of construction.

During this minister's pastorate, an old mortgage indebtedness on the church of \$30,000 was paid; a large Chapel was built adjoining the church, a house was constructed in the rear for the work of the church's various activities; and a building was erected for the Sunday School Library with rooms for the Minister's Study above. In the person of one of its members the church donated \$100,000 to the American Unitarian Association. At a cost of some \$18,000 the interior of the church was remodeled, and the defective acoustics remedied. These alterations were completed October 1893.

After Rev. Weld completed his good work in 1898 the following pastors served the church: Rev. William B. Geoghegan, 1900-1901; Rev. Alfred R. Hussey, 1902-1916; Rev. Charles A. Wing, 1917-1919; Rev. Harry Foster Burns, 1921-1924; and Rev. F. R. Sturtevant, 1925 to the present date. During these years no great changes in the church have taken place with the exception of the name. About twenty years ago the name was changed from the "First Independent Church" to the "First Unitarian Church" at which time the church was incorporated.

The church has always had in its membership many representative Baltimoreans. Enoch Pratt was long a member and served on its board of trustees. Yet the church has not grown, with a seating capacity of about five hundred, there is ample room for its present congregation, and it still remains the only Unitarian Church in the city of Baltimore.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

The writer has found that little ^{and} or no data is available concerning the actual construction of the First Unitarian Church. There are no official records of the cost, and materials used, but the following description of the original church, appears in a letter from Edward Hinkley to Jared Sparks, December 15, 1817. "The new church is nearly complete on the outside. The form is singular and grand. I thought of procuring for you a rough sketch of the building from the architect (Maximilian Godefroy), but understanding from a gentleman here that he had, when at Boston on a visit, given Dr. Freeman a complete plan, I concluded you must have seen it, and therefore I would not procure one. The building is about ninety feet square. It has only six windows, three on each side or end. Though these are very large, nearly thirty feet high and proportionally wide, yet so high are the walls that they appear rather too small. The tops of the windows appear about half, or a little above half, the height of the walls. The block formed by the walls resembles a cube. The entrance or vestibule is a colonnade or a row of four Doric columns projecting a foot or two from the plane of the front wall, terminating above about as high as the windows, and supporting three arches in this form. On the outside of the back wall there is a circular or cylindrical projection, forming a large concave recess within for the pulpit; so that no part of the audience-room will be so far back as the front of the pulpit. Four grand arches, whose ends terminate in the corners within the walls, at about the height of the tops of the windows, rise a little above the walls, and support, on their backs, a large dome nearly of a spherical form, producing a grand spectacle to the

eyes of the beholder. On the top of the dome there is a large skylight. There are no galleries except in front of the pulpit, and you may imagine how spacious and grand it must be within. It is about seventy-five feet from the center of the skylight to the floor."

To the above letter of Hinkley's little can be added pertaining to beauty and appearance. It can be said that this building of Graeco-Roman architecture is considered one of the most beautiful in the United States.

According to Mr. I. C. Corner, one of the older members of the church, there have not been any changes or alterations to the exterior of the church since it was built. This is remarkable when we consider the fact that the building is at present 115 years old. From the following description by the writer, it is hoped that the reader will get a clear picture of the sturdy construction that makes such a feat possible.

The whole length of this edifice including the portico is 108 feet and the breadth 78 feet. The foundation walls are thirty-six inches thick. They are built of rough granite stones smoothed on the outside face and held together with mortar. Brick walls extend upward from the foundation walls to a height of about fifty feet. The rear wall of the church is built in the shape of a portion of a cylinder. The front wall gives to the building its beautiful appearance. The peristyle is formed by a colonnade of the Tuscan order. Four columns and two pilastres, forming three arcades of about twelve feet opening, support the grand Tuscan cornice which runs around the exterior of the pediment, in the center there is a colossal figure of the Angel of Truth, surrounded by rays,

and holding a scroll, on which is inscribed in Greek characters, "To the only God." All of the walls are covered with a mortar and marked with lines so as to give an appearance of large stone block walls. The mortar coating has disintergrated in some places leaving the bare brick walls exposed. The roof slopes back from the walls until it meets the dome which is about fifty feet in diameter.

The basement of the church is divided into five rooms by walls running from the front to the back of the building. These walls are twenty-four inches thick and are of the same material as those forming the foundation. They act as supports for the floor, and take the place of the usual column and stringer type of supports. Some of the rooms formed by these walls are paneled and fitted out as a workshop for classes in modeling and wood carving, but at present they are used for storage. One unusual feature of this basement is the presence of three huge tree stumps which would have involved considerable expense if the contractor ^{had} attempted to remove them. Evidently the specifications were not very rigid in those days regarding excavation.

The main auditorium of the church has been changed so completely that one can see little of the original as described by Hinkley in his letter to Sparks. By climbing a winding stairway access to the old dome may be gained. Here the old beauty is at once apparent, for the plaster and decorations, are still in excellent condition. Only by extreme care in construction, and the use of the best materials, could the builder produce such an enduring structure. All rafters and lathes are sound; the rafters appear to have been hewn to the desired curvature

and are placed only a few inches center to center.

The architect, although he created a noble structure, overlooked two very important details. The height of the building and its shape made it practically impossible to heat the church or to hear the sermon when sitting in the rear pews. The acoustics were so bad that one minister resigned, claiming that he would lose his voice if he continued to preach. In order to remedy these faults, Mr. Joseph Evans Sperry was engaged to completely remodel the interior of the church. These alterations required more than a year of labor and were completed in October 1893. Little of the beauty was lost, as the same architectural characteristics of the original interior were used.

The view on page 19 shows the curved ceiling designed by Mr. Sperry, which is supported by the arches and columns on each side of the church. These columns are made of 12" X 12" timbers and extend upward until the tops are almost level with the highest part of the ceiling. They act as supports for the four roof trusses, which in turn help support the ceiling. The sketches on pages 16 - 17 show the trusses and their supports. It can be seen that practically all members are timber, and there appears to be an exceptionally high factor of safety in the design. The ceiling proper is made of curved rafters, strongly braced, which support the laths and the paneled plaster work. There are one hundred and thirty-five of these panels, which are arranged in nine rows of fifteen each. The lighting system consists of one electric light at the center of each panel.

There are at present many interesting furnishings and works

of art in the church.

The chancel window which is located above the pulpit was not installed when the picture on page 19 was taken. It is from the studies of Tiffany, of New York, was presented to the church by Miss Emma Marburg. The Greek characters symbolize the eternal reality of Jesus Christ.

The Tiffany favrile glass mosaic panel of the Last Supper, was designed by Frederick Wilson, an authority, executed by the Tiffany Company of New York, and placed in the church about 1896, as a memorial, by the Eaton family, who also gave three of the windows. Another was given by the late Mrs. Enoch Pratt.

The pulpit is the original one from which Rev. William Ellery Channing preached the ordination sermon in 1819. It is of black walnut (since painted).

The bust of Dr. Channing, in the north end of the east aisle, and that of Henry Payson, north end of the West aisle, were executed by the sculptor Bartholomew, at Rome, 1855, and were presented to the church by the late Enoch Pratt. That of Dr. Sparks, in the south end of the east aisle, was the gift of his family.

The present baptismal font replaced a smaller one in 1896, and is carved from a solid block of Caen stone quarried in the north of France, it is modeled after the famous Saxon and Norman one in St. Martin's Canterbury.

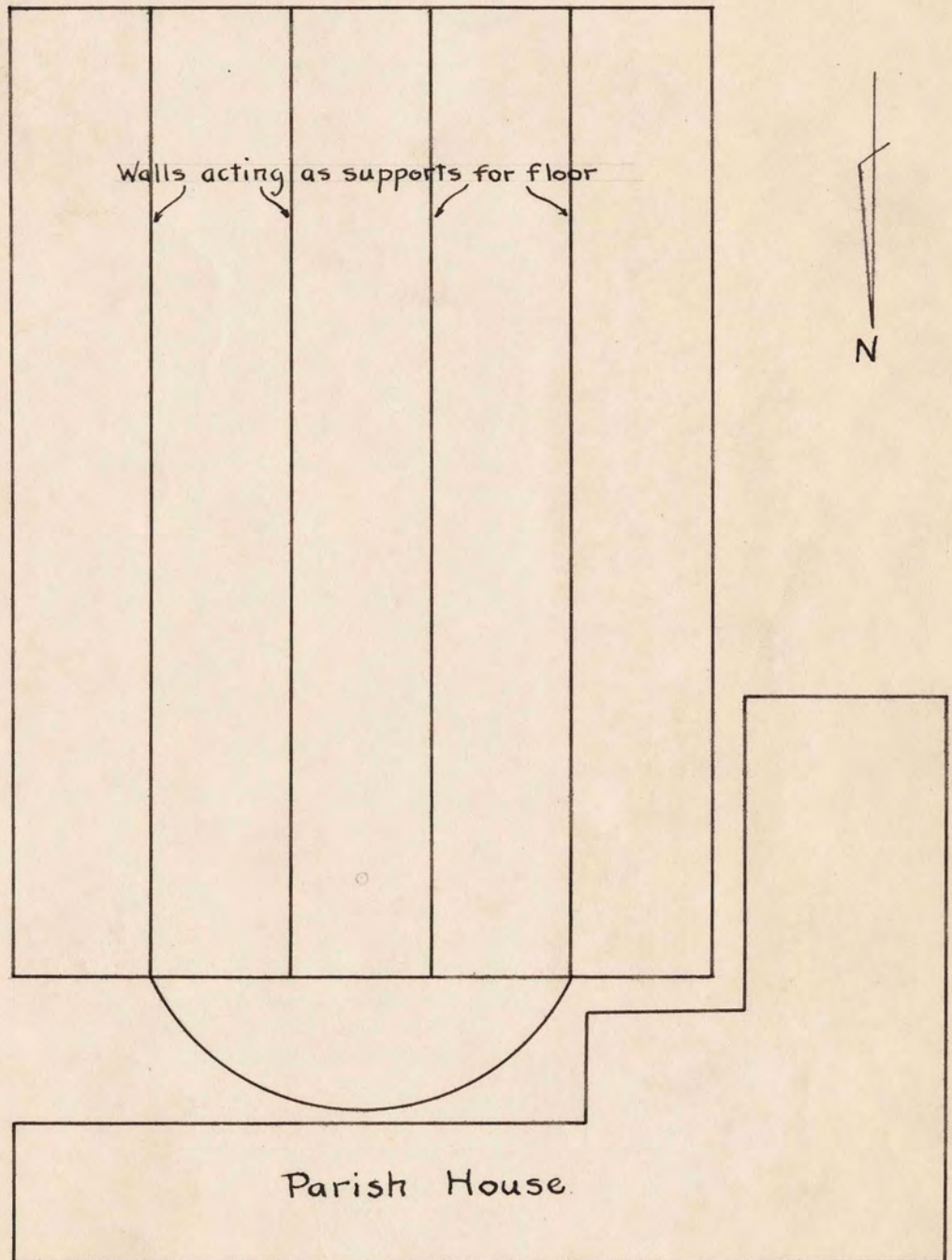
The present organ was the gift of the late Enoch Pratt in 1893. It is situated in the rear of the auditorium, just below the old slaves gallery. It is interesting to note that in the early days of the church

some of the members brought their slaves, and had them hear the services from this gallery.

The parish house is an L shaped building as shown by the sketch on page 14. It is a brick structure, the bricks being given by Enoch Pratt when he tore down some houses in order to construct Baltimore's first public library. The minister's study, secretary's room, library, recreation room, and kitchen; are all located in this building.

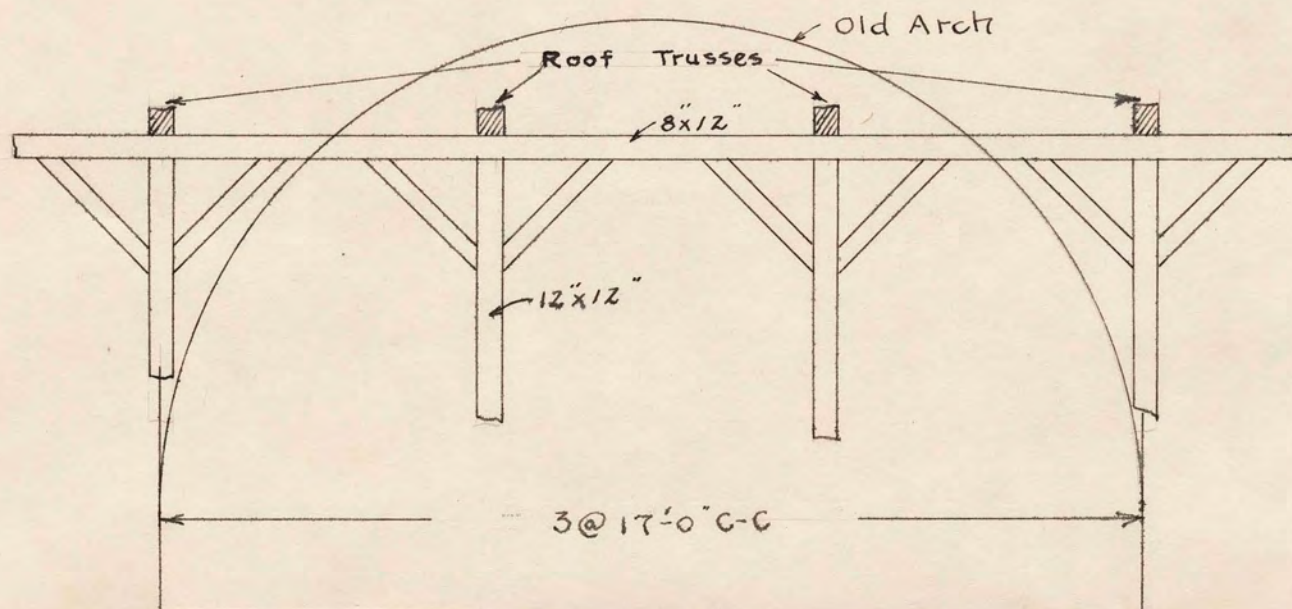
FRANKLIN ST.

CHARLES ST.



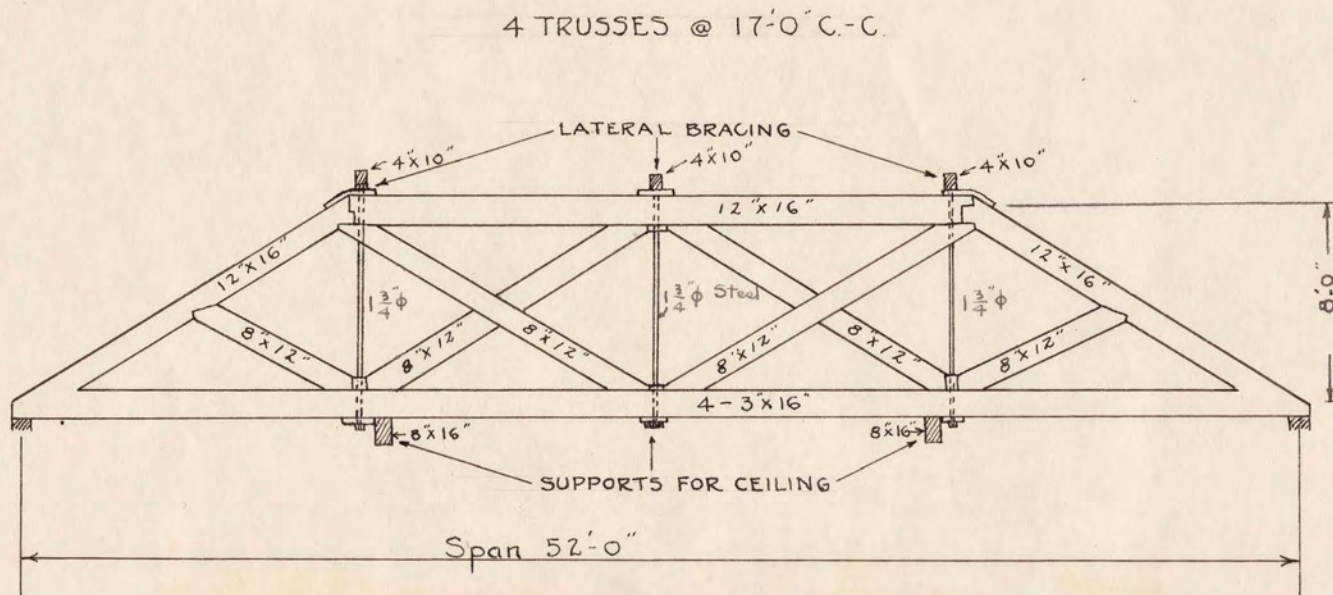
PLAN OF FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH
& PARISH HOUSE

Scale 1" = 20' (approx.)



SKETCH SHOWING TIMBER COLUMNS
AND STRINGERS WHICH SUPPORT THE
ROOF TRUSSES (EAST ELEVATION)

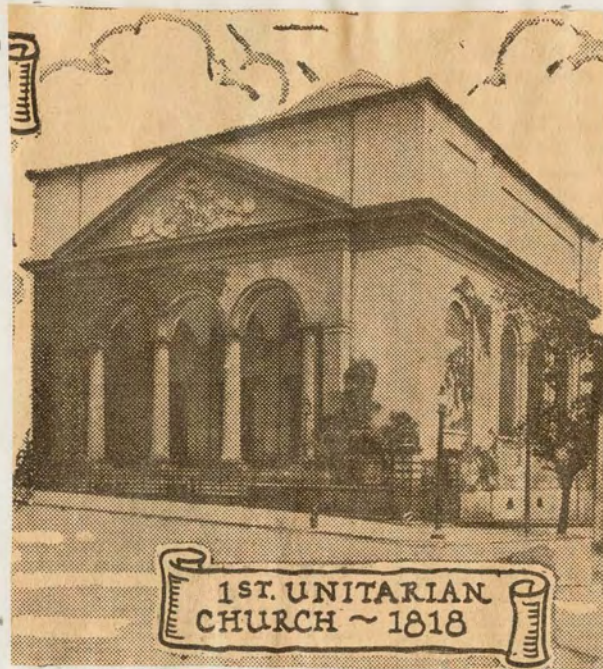
Scale 1" = 10'



SKETCH OF ROOF TRUSS

Scale 1" = 8'







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The material presented in this thesis was obtained from the following sources:

Personal interviews with:

Rev. F. R. Sturtevant, present minister of the First Unitarian Church.

Mr. McGann, present sexton of the First Unitarian Church.

Mr. T. C. Corner, an artist, one of the older members of the church

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Evans Sperry. No information was obtained from Mr. Crisp.

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